Minnesota Supreme Court Chief Justices

A Walking Tour

Minnesota Judicial Center

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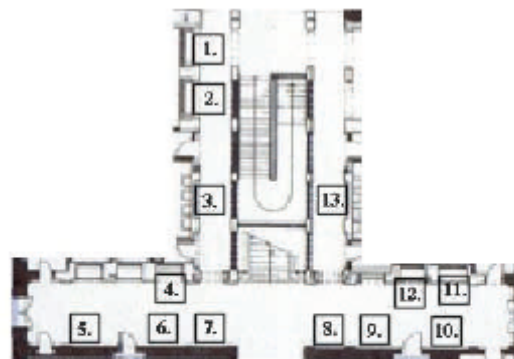www.mncourts.gov

MINNESOTA
JUDICIAL
BRANCH

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1.

Chief Justice Douglas Kenneth Amdahl
(1981-1989)
Artist: Steven Reteggi

Chief Justice Amdahl grew up in Mabel, MN. During his college years, World War II interrupted his education: When poor vision kept him out of the service, he went to California to build military airplanes. By 1943, he was accepted into the Air Force as a cryptographer and saw action on Omaha Beach and in the Battle of the Bulge. At war's end, he finished his bachelor's degree at the University of Minnesota and taught high school mathematics for a year.

He graduated summa cum laude from the Minneapolis College of Law, where he stayed on as registrar and practiced law out of his office. By 1955, he moved to the Hennepin County Attorney's Office.

In 1961, he began his judicial career, moving from municipal judge to district judge to Associate Justice to Chief Justice in 20 years. Upon appointment as Chief Justice, he focused on four initiatives he believed were essential to the future of the Judicial Branch: Sentencing guidelines, establishment of an intermediate Court of Appeals, a state judicial building and judicial salary increases. By the time he retired in 1989, he had accomplished all four goals.

2.

Chief Justice Robert J. Sheran (1973-1981)
Artist: Cyd Wicker

Chief Justice Sheran grew up in Minneapolis and graduated from the College of St. Thomas and the University of Minnesota Law School. He served as law clerk to Chief Justice Henry M. Gallagher, the only time a later Chief served as a clerk to a Chief Justice.

During World War II he was a special agent in the Chicago FBI office. In 1946, he was elected to the Minnesota Legislature and four years later, he was a candidate for lieutenant governor. He finished last in a field of three, ending his partisan political career. For 12 years, he practiced law with Lindquist & Vennum law firm in Minneapolis and was appointed Associate Justice in 1963. He served for seven years before resigning and returning to his law firm. Three years later, he was appointed as Chief Justice.

During his tenure, the court's case load rose steadily. The Minnesota Rules of Evidence were adopted, mandatory continuing legal education requirements were instituted and the court's commitment to better court administration was intensified. He resigned in 1981 and returned to Lindquist & Vennum. He has since served on the governing board of his alma mater and as dean of the Hamline University School of Law.

3.

**Chief Justice Roger L. Dell
(1953-1962)**
Artist: Jerome Ryan

Chief Justice Dell commuted by train from his boyhood home in Shakopee for evening classes at the St. Paul College of Law. Once he earned his law degree, he set up practice in Fergus Falls.

He became known as an outstanding personal injury lawyer with an "intense fighting spirit." In fact, he won so many large claims against insurance companies that two of the companies later became his clients.

His career in public service began as president of the Otter Tail Bar Association and progressed to chair of the Metropolitan Airports Commission for the three years before he was appointed Associate Justice of the Supreme Court in 1953. Six months later, he was appointed Chief Justice. He left the Court and returned to Fergus Falls in 1962, where he lived for four more years.

The Chief Justice and his wife created the Roger and Agnes Dell charitable trust, which continues to distribute grants to groups such as churches and youth organizations.

4.

Chief Justice Alexandar McDonald "Sandy" Keith
(1990-1998)
Artist: Kurt Anderson

Chief Justice Keith was born and raised in Rochester, MN. He graduated from Amherst College and Yale Law School, and served with the Marine Corps in Korea, where he was the only lawyer in a regiment of 6,000. Returning to Rochester, he began practice at the Mayo Clinic under the supervision of future U.S. Supreme Court Justice Harry A. Blackmun. Five years later, he started his own law firm.

In the 1950s, he began a political career marked by narrow victories: election to the state Senate by 160 votes, election as lieutenant governor by 5,000 votes statewide and endorsement for governor in 1966 on the 20th ballot. However, the 1966 primary election ended the string and he returned to private practice.

He was appointed to the Supreme Court as Associate Justice in 1989 and became Chief Justice the following year. His best-known legacy was completion of the unification of the trial bench, which began 20 years prior to his appointment. His other initiatives included welcoming greater elements of diversity into the legal profession and integrating computer technology into every state court.

After he resigned from the Court in 1998, he returned to practice family law in Rochester and became a Distinguished Practitioner in Residence at Hamline University School of Law.

5.

Chief Justice Charles Monroe Start
(1895-1913)
Artist: Nicholas R. Brewer

Chief Justice Start was the son of a farmer and township justice of the peace in rural Vermont. He worked his way through Barre Academy and did family chores in the household of a Vermont judge while he apprenticed law in the judge's chambers.

He enlisted in the Union Army, but was discharged for medical reasons within a year. He moved to Rochester, MN, to practice law.

While in Rochester, he served as the City Attorney, the Olmsted County Attorney, the Attorney General of Minnesota, a district judge and by 1894, he was elected Chief Justice of the state Supreme Court. He resigned shortly before the expiration of his term in 1913.

Chief Justice Start was one of the early Minnesota lawyers who wrote the legal history of the state. As Chief Justice, he authored opinions that advanced economic development by upholding the authority of the Legislature to lease public lands for mining, and by declaring unconstitutional a law that gave regulatory authority over railroad stock issues.

Following his resignation from the Court, he practiced law in St. Paul until his death in 1919.

6.

Chief Justice James Renwick McMillan
(1874-1875)
Artist: Nicholas R. Brewer

Chief Justice McMillan was born and raised in Pennsylvania, where he graduated from Pennsylvania Western University in 1846. After "reading the law" under Edwin M. Stanton, who later became U.S. Secretary of War under President Abraham Lincoln, he entered practice in Pennsylvania. He moved to Stillwater, Minnesota Territory, in 1852 and then to St. Paul four years later.

Upon statehood in 1858, McMillan was elected one of the original six district judges, an office he held until his appointment to the Supreme Court in 1864. Ten years later, he became Chief Justice. He resigned the following year, when the Republican Party asked him to run for the Minnesota Senate. He served two terms there.

He died in St. Paul in 1897.

7.

Chief Justice Christopher G. Ripley
(1870-1874)
Artist: F.H. Smith

Chief Justice Ripley was born in Massachusetts in 1822, the son of a minister and descendant of a governor of that commonwealth.

After he graduated from Harvard College, he spent a year at Harvard Law School, but completed his legal education by apprenticeship in the office of a prestigious Boston lawyer. He moved to Brownsville, Minnesota Territory, in 1855. Eventually, he moved to Chatfield, MN, where he practiced law for many years.

He won the Chief Justice's chair in an 1869 election upset, defeating Chief Justice Gilfillan. He took office in 1870, but resigned four years later in poor health and returned to Massachusetts.

He died in 1881.

8.

Chief Justice James Gilfillan
(1869-1870, 1875-1894)
Artist: Nicholas R. Brewer

Chief Justice Gilfillan was the second of the two foreign-born Minnesota Chief Justices. His family moved from Bannockburn, Scotland to a farm near Utica, New York when he was one.

He began studying law at age 16 and was admitted to the bar in 1850. After seven years of practice, he moved to St. Paul in the Minnesota Territory.

In 1862, he was commissioned a second lieutenant in the Minnesota Infantry. Promoted to captain, he saw action against the Sioux in the Dakotas, and fought in the Civil War in Tennessee and Kentucky. By 1864 he had become Colonel Gilfillan. After the war, he resumed his practice in St. Paul, until he was appointed Chief Justice in 1869.

He lost election - so served less than a year - but he was reappointed in 1875 and as Chief Justice continued in that position until his death in 1894.

His 20 years in office make Chief Justice Gilfillan the longest-serving Chief Justice. He was also the only Chief Justice to have served a split term, and one of the only two chiefs to die in office. His opinions span 40 volumes of *Minnesota Reports*, the first 20 volumes of which he personally revised and annotated.

9.

Chief Justice Thomas Wilson (1865-1869)
Artist: Nicholas R. Brewer

Chief Justice Wilson was the first of two foreign-born Chief Justices. He moved from County Tyrone, Ireland, to a farm in Pennsylvania when he was 11 years old.

He graduated from Allegheny College, where he studied law, and shortly thereafter, moved to Winona, Minnesota Territory. When Minnesota became a state in 1858, he became one of the original district judges, with his chambers in Winona.

After six years on the district bench, he was appointed to the Supreme Court in 1864. He was elevated to Chief Justice a year later, becoming the first person to serve in both offices. After four years, he resigned to return to private practice and politics.

He was a member of the state constitutional convention in 1857 and later served in the U.S. House of Representatives. In 1892, he became general counsel for the Chicago, St. Paul, Minneapolis and Omaha Railroad, a position he held until his death in 1910.

10.

Chief Justice Calvin Luther Brown (1913-1923)
Artist: Nicholas R. Brewer

Chief Justice Brown was the son of a district judge, and he himself spent nearly his entire legal career on the bench. He served in the Minnesota Judiciary 36 years, as a district judge for 12 years, Associate Justice for 14 years and Chief Justice for 10 years. He also lectured in law for many years at the University of Minnesota.

He was said to have a "pure and upright character," to be a quiet, unassuming man who was better known to the poor and needy than to the more fortunate members of society. He was born in New Hampshire and moved to Shakopee when he was one. He later moved to Willmar, Minnesota Territory. He read law in his father's office, which eventually moved to Morris. While there, he was elected the Stevens County Attorney until his appointment as district judge in 1887.

He died suddenly, while Chief Justice, in 1923. He was one of only two Chief Justices to die in office.

11.

Chief Justice Peter S. Popovich
(1983-1987)
Artist: Jerome Ryan

Chief Justice Popovich was a man of firsts: the first Chief Judge of the Minnesota Court of Appeals, the first Associate Justice from the Iron Range, and the first – and only – person to be both Chief Judge and Chief Justice.

He was born in Crosby, MN and attended Hibbing Junior College and the University of Minnesota. In 1947, he received his law degree from the St. Paul College of Law. During his work for the Minnesota Territorial Centennial Committee, he traveled the state giving speeches. On one trip, he was stricken with polio and lost his ability to speak. But four months of intensive physical therapy restored his speech.

He was later elected to the Minnesota Legislature in 1952 and served five terms. During nearly 40 years of practice as head of his own firm, he also flew as a captain in the civil air patrol, served on the State Higher Education Coordinating Commission and reigned as King Vulcan in the St. Paul Winter Carnival.

In 1983, he was appointed first Chief Judge of the newly created Minnesota Court of Appeals. After five years as Chief Judge, he was appointed Associate Justice of the Supreme Court. And two years after that, he was elevated to Chief Justice, but served less than two years because of the mandatory statutory retirement age of 70. He returned to practicing law in 1990 and died in St. Paul six years later.

12.

Chief Justice Oscar R. Knutson (1962-1973)
Artist: Jerome Ryan

Chief Justice Knutson was born in Superior, WI, and grew up on a farm near Warren, MN. He graduated from the Northwest School of Agriculture and attended one year of college at St. Olaf. He later received his law degree from the University of Minnesota.

Until his appointment as district judge in 1941, he practiced law in Warren. As mayor of that city for three terms, he also served as unpaid city attorney. In 1948, Governor Luther Youngdahl called him and told him that he would be appointed Associate Justice. He served 15 years before he was named Chief Justice, a post he held for 11 years. His combined tenure of 26 years is the longest for any Chief Justice on the Court.

He was known as an innovator in judicial administration. He successfully lobbied to expand the Court to nine members (the Court was reduced again to seven members following the creation of the Court of Appeals), he created a state public defender system, he established an office of court administration and an annual judicial conference, and he expanded the system of lawyer and judge discipline. He was also known as a walking legal encyclopedia, possessing an uncanny ability on the bench or in conference to walk to the shelf, pick out a volume of *Minnesota Reports* and find a particular case – without any written citation.

13.

Chief Justice Samuel Bailey Wilson
(1923-1933)
Artist: Nicholas R. Brewer

Chief Justice Wilson moved to Mankato, MN, as a child from his birthplace in Prices Branch, MO, in 1873. He attended Mankato public schools and graduated from Mankato State Normal School in 1894. His graduation from the University of Minnesota Law School made him the first Chief Justice to graduate from a law school in this state.

He began his law practice in his hometown, where he also worked as a probate judge, as the Blue Earth County Attorney and in several public positions during World War I. He was appointed to the Supreme Court in 1923.

Chief Justice Wilson resigned from the Court in 1933 to return to his law practice in Mankato, where he died in 1954.

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